

MEDICAL HISTORY

HUGHENNA L. GAUNTLETT, MD, FACS: A PROFILE IN COURAGE

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Hughenna Louise Gauntlett, MD, FACS, is the first African-American female to be certified by the American Board of Surgery. Her courageous life began in Costa Rica in 1915. At home, in the United States, and throughout her life, she has remained a model of humility. Her accomplishments, however, reflect strength and leadership.

Dr Gauntlett's life was always directed by a higher force. The only role model in her family was her grandmother, Mary Elizabeth Spencer, a nurse midwife. Ms Spencer was the "doctor" of the community, but Hughenna does not remember wanting to pursue a career in medicine during the time she spent with her grandmother. Hughenna would later go on to school in Jamaica where the stimulus for her medical career would begin. She states, "My mother had played the lottery which was highly forbidden in the Seventh Day Adventist tradition, and she won! It was only a few thousand dollars but enough to move the family to Jamaica where the best secondary school in the Caribbean existed." She walked two miles to and from a school where strict discipline was practiced.

While in secondary school, Dr Gauntlett remembers a young man, in whom she had an interest, who wanted to study medicine. Being the "obligatory significant other," she announced she would study medicine and become a nurse. Although he did not go on to achieve his goal, Hughenna Gauntlett surpassed hers. She chose medicine instead of nursing because this would be her ticket to the United States. Jamaica had just developed a strong nursing curriculum within the University but did not have a medical school. She reasoned that an

application to the United States for the purpose of studying medicine would be approved, but not one to study nursing. Indeed, her application was approved, and in 1940, New York greeted her in the dead of winter.

Hughenna adjusted to the weather just as she would adjust to being one of a few women in her premedical class of 60 students and the only African American in the entire class. As a student in the United States, she was not allowed to work, but her father gave her just enough money for car fare and food. She ventured to work in a factory downtown with her aunt that summer but did not work for long fearing the authorities would discover this, and she would be deported. She applied to attend school in Massachusetts at Atlantic Union College, which was in the tradition of her Jamaican schooling in that she would not get paid, but the money for her labor would be credited to her student account. In 1946 while at Union College, Hughenna Gauntlett met a board member who suggested that she apply to begin medical school in 1946 instead of 1947. He reasoned that the large number of males returning from World War II would create a much larger applicant pool for the 1947 class. Dr Gauntlett wrote to Loma Linda University where she had previously applied and asked to be considered for the class of 1946, a request that was accepted.

Dr Gauntlett did not understand how she would accomplish the early 1946 admission since she had very little money and still had the second half of organic chemistry, one year of physics, and a whole year of government to complete to meet medical school requirements. "This was entirely a matter of faith!," she says. Once again the force above made a way for her to complete these requirements. At Atlantic Union College, she was informed that they did not offer any of her required courses in their summer program. Dr Gauntlett traveled back to New York hoping she would

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be able to take the needed courses in one of their schools. However, none of the universities to which she applied provided all of these courses during the summer. Hughenna Gauntlett wrote to the registrar of Loma Linda explaining her dilemma. Loma Linda replied that they had just hired a physics professor and would open a course just for her as the only student. The organic chemistry course was offered also, and she took the government course by correspondence. Hughenna successfully passed all three courses.

She arrived at Loma Linda University in September 1946 eager to work but was unable to gain admission to the all-male campus dormitory, although other females resided there. Being forced to live off campus, she would spend more time commuting than other students. She rented a room from a white family, which "... was one of the most blessed things that happened to me in my life." To her surprise, they did her laundry, cleaned her room, and provided her with meals in times of financial strain. Dr Gauntlett excelled in her courses and studied intensely to complete medical school, knowing that her performance would affect other women and African Americans to come.

When others would ask if she was still in school she would reply, "I am here, and I will be here to the end." Hughenna Gauntlett accepted and met the challenge. In her medical school class of 96, there were eight women and two male African Americans. Dr Gauntlett's experience at Loma Linda was not filled with racism or exclusion, although a few blatant isolated incidents occurred. One such encounter during a clinical rotation involved a nurse, the wife of a classmate, who would counteract her orders or requests and reverse some of the tasks she completed. This did not deter her.

Dr Gauntlett completed her basic science years at Loma Linda University and the clinical years at LA County and White Memorial Hospitals in Los Angeles. She finished medical school in 1950 and completed her internship at Sydenham Hospital in New York City. Looking back, Dr Gauntlett does not remember any one aspect of her surgical rotation that attracted her to surgery; her interest in surgery developed after being in private practice. Following the completion of her internship, she entered private practice in Watts, California with Dr Cathlene Jones-King, another black female medical pioneer. While in private practice with Dr King, Dr Gauntlett saw many patients with surgical diseases and became frustrated that she had to refer them to other physicians for treatment. While assisting other surgeons in the operating room, she discovered that she possessed technical skills. "What I did in the

operating room did not seem difficult to me. . . It was like it came natural." Other surgeons observed this agility and encouraged her to become a surgeon.

Her practice was very busy and rewarding, including house calls and long hours with would pay comparable to that for residents (\$3 per office visit and \$5 for house calls). Dr Gauntlett was married in 1952 to Frank Antonio Santos. One year later, she gave birth to a set of twins, Alfred Augustine and Arthur Dwayne.

After being in private practice for a few years and wanting to spend more time with her family, and thinking that subspecialization would permit this, she took a grand step and attended a postgraduate surgical course at Loma Linda. Dr Gauntlett chose to take her children, who were for the most part not a problem. However, on one occasion they embarrassed her while she was in the operating room. She had instructed them to page her only in an emergency. Dr Gauntlett was contacted in the operating room by a nurse who reported to her that there was a discrepancy in the owner of a particular toy with which they were playing. She continued to persevere.

Dr Gauntlett applied to a surgical residency program. One of her applications was for Los Angeles County Hospital. They did not officially accept or reject her, which she found disturbing. The questions she was asked during the interview about her family responsibilities led her to believe they viewed her as less qualified than male applicants. After her interview with the California Hospital Surgical Board, she was accepted with the support of Dr John Gifford and Dr Greg Manning who were impressed with her perseverance and intelligence. Dr Gifford reports that the room was silent after Dr Gauntlett completed her interview. He finally broke the silence and asked, "Well, what shall we do with Dr Gauntlett?"

During her residency at California Hospital she also encountered difficult situations. Once when Hughenna was a junior resident, a radiologist bypassed resident Gauntlett and called the attending physician directly to see a positive finding on a preoperative chest radiograph. Luckily, the radiology technician called Hughenna and told her about the positive finding before her attending physician summoned her to the viewing room to evaluate the radiograph. In another incident, Dr Gauntlett entered the room of a patient to complete a history and physical examination and the patient refused to speak to her. Later, after speaking with the attending physician, the patient was very cheerful and gracious to Dr Gauntlett.

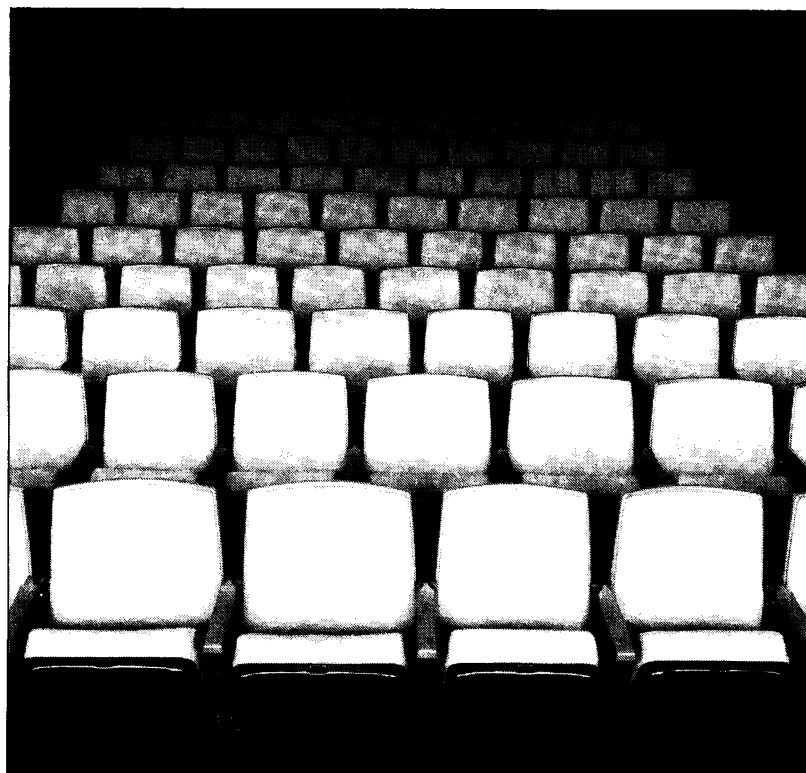
She completed her surgical residency at Kaiser and

California Hospital and was approved to sit for the surgical boards. During her oral boards in 1968, Dr Albritten remarked, "You know, I think you are the first black female to come through here, and I've been sitting on the board for many years." Dr Gauntlett was certified by the American Board of Surgery on May 23, 1968.

She stayed on to practice at California Hospital, where she became chairman of the general surgery department in 1980. She retired in 1986 and now lives in Oceanside, California where she teaches gross

anatomy as a volunteer. Her backyard and greenhouse boast many species of orchids, occupying most of her time these days. Her husband, also a physician, died in 1991. Both of her children are physicians, and one is a surgeon presently in the research laboratories at Massachusetts General Hospital. The other is an internist in private practice in Denver, Colorado.

Hughenna Gauntlett is a talented, intelligent, and perseverant individual, an asset to the surgical community, and a "profile in courage."



For someone
with a
wheelchair
there isn't
a seat
in the house.

In many theaters, this simple pleasure is still unavailable for the hundreds of thousands of people who use wheelchairs.

It's time we made room for everybody.

Awareness is the first step towards change.

